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SUBJECT: COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS AFFAIRS AND PROTESTANT ORGANIZATION
UPDATE POLOFF ON RELIGIOUS DEVELOPMENTS

REF: HANOI 1880

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) The Government Committee on Religious Affairs (CRA) told Poloff on December 19 that it will issue recognition certificates to two previously unrecognized church organizations on December 23. The CRA also confirmed the existence of a controversial training manual on Protestantism. The manual, intended for use by local officials, includes language that might be construed as encouraging forced renunciation of some recently converted ethnic minority Protestants. The CRA suggested that this language may be revised. Northern Protestants confirmed two new registrations of ethnic minority congregations and predicted others, though "progress has slowed" in some provinces. We are encouraged by positive statements of government officials and Protestants going into the New Year, but will continue to encourage the CRA to increase the pace of registration work and revise the training manual so that it cannot be interpreted by officials as authorization to encourage renunciations of faith. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On December 19, Dang Tai Tinh, Director of the CRA International Cooperation Department, briefed Poloff on year-end religious freedom developments in Vietnam. Tinh expressed the CRA's appreciation for the USG's recent decision to remove Vietnam from the list of Countries of Particular Concern on religious freedom. "One way or another, the GVN will continue to promote the spiritual well-being of its citizens," Tinh added.

Religious Freedom Developments

¶3. (SBU) Tinh read Poloff portions of the end-of-year internal CRA report on religious developments. The report confirmed that, in September, CRA provided recognition certificates to 3 previously unrecognized religions, the United World Mission Church and two Buddhist organizations and during October issued registration certificates to 25 Protestant congregations, in addition to others, in Ho Chi Minh City, including 17 belonging to unrecognized organizations. Beyond this previously reported information, Tinh also confirmed that the CRA will issue recognition certificates to the 7th Day Adventists and the General Baptist Conference (Grace Baptist Church) on December 23. (Note: Both churches were among those allowed to register "sub-congregations" in Ho Chi Minh City in October. This latest certificate will legalize their entire organizations. End Note.) In addition, there are now 781 Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) "meeting points" registered in the Central Highlands (an increase of 73 since October), and another 123 registered places of worship affiliated with other religious organizations in the region.

14. (SBU) The CRA report also confirmed that between June and October, 27 Evangelical Church of Vietnam North (ECVN) churches in 9 Northern and Northwest Highlands provinces were issued registration certificates as part of the CRA's pilot registration program. As promised, the CRA is now assisting provinces in the North to develop their own registration programs based on the results of the pilot registrations. Tinh could not provide numbers of additional congregations registered since October, but stated that "a few additional churches have received their certificates."

15. (SBU) Tinh also noted that the CRA met with a delegation of U.S., Hong Kong and Ho Chi Minh City representatives of the Church of Latter Day Saints on November 9 and the CRA is now considering whether to register several Mormon congregations in Hanoi. Tinh also highlighted the CRA's recent publication and distribution of bibles (and Buddhist materials) in the ethnic minority languages of Jarai, Ede and Bana (and Khmer) in the Central Highlands.

Protestantism Training Document

16. (SBU) Poloff asked Tinh to confirm the existence of a CRA training document designed for local officials on Protestantism, and noted our concern that the current version of the document, provided to us by religious activists, divides Protestants into three cohorts depending on the length of time these ethnic minority individuals have professed belonging to the religion. Poloff also noted that the training document's instructions to local officials to encourage recently converted Protestants to return to their traditional beliefs appears to be an explicit instruction to force some Protestants to renounce their faith.

17. (SBU) Tinh confirmed that the training document is a CRA publication used as a training manual for provincial, district and commune officials in the North. The manual is issued to officials who attend training workshops on the PM's Instruction on

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Protestantism and is designed to educate them about the religion. The division of Protestants into 3 cohorts reflects an internal GVN compromise brokered by CRA in order to address the concerns of local officials (who are often ethnic minority traditionalists) about "instability" arising in remote regions from conflict between ethnic minority traditionalists and recent Protestant converts. Tinh acknowledged that the manual's language about encouraging recent converts to return to their traditional customs could be interpreted as an instruction to force renunciation; however, "to err is human" and CRA has already made several edits to the manual correcting language that could be misinterpreted by unsophisticated officials at lower levels.

The Protestant View

18. (SBU) On December 14, ECVN General Secretary Au Quang Vinh told Poloff that the ECVN is delighted with recent developments concerning religious freedom in the North. For example, immediately following Vinh's November 19 participation in an ecumenical prayer service with President Bush in Hanoi (and a meeting later that day with Secretary Rice at the Ambassador's residence), he traveled to Lang Son Province to participate in the inauguration of a new ethnic H'mong church in Bac Son District associated with the legacy Dzaio ECVN church in the same locality. This congregation was not on the list of pilot registrations promulgated by the CRA before the APEC November Summit. Vinh said that provincial officials decided to allow the congregation's registration shortly after, and in direct response to, the Ambassador's visit with the Dzaio congregation in July (Ref A). Vinh also reported that another congregation in Thai Nguyen Province was allowed to register in November and ECVN plans a similar event as above with this new church. This congregation was also not on the list of pilot registrations promulgated by the CRA before APEC. Vinh speculates that other previously unregistered churches have similarly received their registration certificates in the North and Northwest regions, but he simply has not heard from them yet.

¶9. (SBU) Poloff asked if there has been any GVN retrenchment on religious freedom since the APEC summit. Vinh reiterated that ECVN has not heard any reports of police harassment of churches in the North since last January. He said that, since APEC, progress on religious freedom continues to advance in some areas while "slowing in some others"; however, the situation has not actually deteriorated in these problematic areas, rather "forward progress has simply slowed". (Note: Vinh did not elaborate. End Note). Vinh reported that ECVN President Pastor Phung Quang Huyen traveled to Lai Chau Province in early November (during APEC) as planned. Huyen received a chilly reception from provincial officials and a slightly more lukewarm reception from district officials; however, the provincial and district authorities allowed Huyen an unprecedented opportunity to meet and worship with an unregistered ECVN church while he was in the province (NFI).

¶10. (SBU) Vinh also reported that Protestant and Catholic relations in the North are "the best they have ever been" since the November 19 ecumenical service. ECVN and the Hanoi Archdiocese have had a good exchange of ideas on promoting religious freedom for Christians in Vietnam since the event and some Catholic parishioners have even started attending Protestant services and vice versa in order to learn more about each other's faiths.

Comment

¶11. (SBU) While we had hoped for more concrete information on end of year religious developments, particularly on Protestant registrations before Christmas, we are encouraged by the level of good feeling expressed by the CRA and the ECVN about the status of religious freedom in Vietnam. We were also encouraged by the CRA's acknowledgement of the problems with their training manual. Now that the CRA has confirmed that the document is official, we will document our specific concerns and more formally press for revisions.

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